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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000931

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: SOHN HAK-KYU STICKS TO HIS PRINCIPLES

REF: SEOUL 811

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In his first meeting with the Ambassador since leaving the GNP Party on March 19, Presidential aspirant (and former Gyeonggi Governor) Sohn Hak-kyu said that he had to leave because he was not willing to compromise his principles to stay in line with the inflexible GNP platform. Sohn expected a long and hard road ahead as he worked to form a new party but he planned to take his time and allow the Korean people to come to understand his approach in more detail. Sohn said he remained committed to his support for the KORUS FTA and to his policy of engagement with North Korea. Despite his support for the FTA, Sohn said he was concerned about the mounting opposition in Korea against the deal and that he expected difficulty in obtaining a positive vote in the National Assembly. Sohn suggested that the USG should be more flexible on its negotiating timetable for the FTA. END SUMMARY.

NO ROOM FOR SOHN

¶2. (C) Following his departure from the GNP on March 19, Sohn Hak-kyu said that he expected to go through a period of difficulty and hardship. He said he left the party for two reasons: (1) there was no possibility to make room for himself within the party given the alignment of Assemblymen around the two major political candidates; and (2) the GNP had moved toward "old-style" politics, an ideology that was not in line with Sohn's reform-minded thinking. Even if there might have been some room left for Sohn, staying would have required a change in his core principles and was therefore not worth the sacrifice. Sohn said that he departed the GNP both for short-term politics but also for broader political reasons. Divisive politics of confrontation should be overcome and a new era of politics should begin. Sohn also said that he never really considered joining the ruling camp (despite many suggestions that he do so) as that would have spelled "death" for him politically and philosophically.

¶3. (C) Sohn said he planned to establish a new party but was not in a hurry to do so. He could gather several Uri

defectors and Democratic Party members to form a voting bloc now, but that would send the wrong message. More time was needed to explain his plan to the Korean people before he founded a new party. Sohn added he did not feel any time pressure but if he moved too fast, he would make mistakes and ultimately fail. He noted that President Roh Moo-hyun had not been selected as a Presidential candidate until a month before the 2002 elections, so there was no need to hurry.

SIX-PARTY TALKS

¶4. (C) Asked about signs the GNP was changing its policy on North Korea, Sohn said "The GNP cannot stick to its old principles, it must adapt." By leaving the party, he said he hoped his action had served as a catalyst to help the GNP adapt to the current dynamic political environment. As the 6PT progressed, the GNP had not followed the U.S. move to work more closely with the DPRK. Peace on the Peninsula would only come through better relations with the DPRK based on reciprocity and close coordination with the U.S. The 6PT provided a way to embrace North Korea and work toward a permanent peace regime in Northeast Asia.

FTA: CONTINUED SUPPORT

¶5. (C) Sohn noted that he was the first high-level politician to speak out in favor of the KORUS FTA. After his departure from the GNP, many suggested he should change his stance on the FTA. Although he was still committed to the FTA, there was great difficulty ahead as the deal would cause intense debate in the National Assembly. Opposition to the FTA had mounted and President Roh did not have a strategy to successfully conclude the agreement or sell it publicly. Roh could not even convince his own party that the FTA was in Korea's interest. Sohn said that the Uri Party felt they were out of the loop on the FTA as only a few high-level officials were kept apprised of the progress and details of the negotiations.

FTA: HOW KOREANS THINK

¶6. (C) Sohn claimed that the U.S. still did not fully understand how Korean people think. Going back to the 2002 incident where two schoolgirls were killed by a USFK armored vehicle, Sohn said that the U.S. handled the incident from a legal perspective and did not immediately address the true concerns of the Korean people. Sohn was concerned that a similar situation had emerged with the FTA talks. By dictating a set end-date for the talks, the U.S. side had placed Korea in an awkward position. Korean people felt the U.S. was arrogant and stubborn. Sohn cited the opinion of a prominent Korean intellectual who felt that the Korean side had been pulled into the talks against its will. The Ambassador said the Korean people would have a different perception once they had a chance to review the content of the KORUS FTA - they would see that their negotiators worked hard and achieved a balanced deal.

¶7. (C) By raising the rice issue in the FTA, the U.S. side had unnecessarily provoked the Korean people, Sohn said. Rice was not simply an economic issue; it was a national symbol to the Korean people. Because of deep emotional attachment to rice, the Korean people could not see past the U.S. actions and understand that the Korean side had raised equally challenging issues. Given more time to help the people understand the agreement, Sohn said that there was a chance for the success of the FTA. If the FTA further divided the Korean people, however, the U.S. would be blamed.

COMMENT

18. (C) Despite Sohn's claims that he was not in a hurry to form a new party, it is clear that he is actively working to establish himself as a viable candidate for the Blue House. His current strategy is to stack up a sizeable poll lead over progressive candidates, such as Kim Geun-tae and Chung Dong-young, and, thereafter, present himself as the only viable alternative to the GNP candidates. This is not impossible, especially as these progressive candidates barely register in the polls, whereas Sohn has already seen a small up tick in the polls since his defection (from 4.6 to 7.4 percent). One rumor is that Sohn is working overtime to win former President Kim Dae-jung's support, which, if given, would certainly boost Sohn's candidacy. But there are big "ifs" because it is highly unlikely that all the progressive candidates will make room for a GNP drop-out. Conventional wisdom in Korean politics is that "run-away" candidates never prosper. So far at least, Sohn has shown no signs that he's an exception. Nevertheless, he has been campaigning full-time since July 1, 2006 and he will not let up. It remains to be seen if a change in parties will increase his popularity significantly. End Comment.

VERSHBOW